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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2799
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 FREETOWN 000304

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/FO, AF/W (JHUNTER)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PREL KWMN ASEC KJUS KCRM SL

SUBJECT: GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN SIERRA LEONE

REF: A. STATE 64939

¶B. FREETOWN 250

¶1. Summary: Gender-based violence (GBV) and inequality are tragic norms in Sierra Leone. Long-entrenched in the culture and reinforced during the civil war years, GBV is one of the most significant human rights issues facing Sierra Leone today. Though policy-makers, organizations, and the international community are aware of the need to change this endemic problem, effecting change in practice has been, and will continue to be, a challenge. Despite this, a cadre of dedicated stakeholders has been working to address these issues, and Ambassador and other embassy officers use every opportunity possible to discuss GBV and the need to eradicate it. Ambassador frequently discusses GBV with high-level government contacts, and includes it as a key talking point at many public events. Embassy officers meet regularly with those working on the issue across the country, both to share information and to provide public support for their endeavors. Political will to effectively address GBV exists here, despite the underlying social mores that serve as an engine to drive abuses to continue: supporting that political will with enhanced aid and technical assistance is a critical priority, and would be an investment that would pay back dividends in terms of improved governance, health, education, economic strength, and stability in the years to come. End Summary.

¶2. Post is pleased to respond to the queries posed by the Department, with information keyed to ref tel A. It is important to note that rape is just one of the problems affecting women in Sierra Leone: domestic violence, forced female genital mutilation, and limited access to assistance and justice are also key issues to consider.

¶A. Despite limited resources, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) is engaged on the GBV issue and trying to take action at the policy and coordination level. The National Committee on GBV (NaC-GBV) meets once a month, and is chaired by the Minister of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs (MOSWGCA). It is co-chaired by an Assistant Inspector General from the Sierra Leone Police (SLP). Its purpose is to coordinate the activities of other agencies working on GBV, mobilize resources, and advocate for policy change. They serve as subject matter experts on draft pieces of legislation, such as the pending Sexual Offense Bill, and encourage citizens to support them. The NaC-GBV has created regional GBV committees in Bo, Kenema, and Makeni, and provided training on GBV response and prevention strategies to them. They currently do not have the funding to create similar committees at the district level.

The GBV office within the MOSWGCA coordinates the national response to GBV. Its activities, though, are almost completely donor-funded: the International Rescue Committee (IRC) funds the office's staff, while UNIFEM provides direct donor support. The GBV office does not conduct programming itself, but coordinates the activities of other agencies through the NaC-GBV. The Family Support Unit (FSU) within the

SLP is the only government agency that is able to fund its own GBV-related activities, and even it is largely donor-supported. FSU officers are trained to handle GBV cases, and further training is now being provided to all police cadets entering the Academy. The Ministry of Health is mandated to provide free medical services to victims, but in practice this does not occur.

1B. The USG does not currently provide direct funding in Sierra Leone for efforts to combat or address GBV, though USAID/West Africa provided funding to the IRC "Rainbo Centers" through the West Africa Ambassador's AIDS Fund in calendar years 2006 and 2007. The Rainbo Centers provide medical and counseling services, and assisted 1,235 clients at 3 centers in 2008. These Centers are the only physical locations that victims can be referred to for services and are considered to be highly effective. Rainbo Centers are client-focused, meaning that they provide medical, legal and/or counseling services depending on the desires of the victim. Contacts noted that without the Rainbo Centers, victims would have nowhere to turn: many expressed a desire to have additional Centers built in the district capitals, as well as expand into primary care facilities. Given that the Rainbo Centers are entirely donor-funded, however, continued care and expansion of services will only result through additional external support. The MOSWGCA is currently constructing two shelters on its own, but are aware of the challenges they face once they are open to the public in terms of maintenance and sustainability. The Ministry is also aware that they will be unable to provide services should the Rainbo Centers close (Note: The MOSWGCA is chronically under-funded, even as its mandate continues to grow. End

FREETOWN 00000304 002 OF 004

Note), and have been unable to meet even basic targets, such as providing the FSUs with social workers/counselors. Thus far, five social workers have been posted to FSUs, but funds for additional staff are unavailable.

Less than ten organizations provide legal aid, and some psycho-social care is available outside of the Rainbo Centers from private NGOs who have funding from a variety of sources. Some private and public health centers provide medical services, but almost always require a fee. Medical reports provided to the courts by these institutions are usually thrown out of court for being incomplete due to poorly-trained staff. The country lacks a clear referral pathway for victims, to ensure that they receive the compliment of comprehensive services available: no case management is provided. The Ministry, however, is attempting to identify service providers in all areas to create a "service map" to assist victims and organizations in identifying services in their local area.

IRC and other NGOs conduct weekly radio programs throughout the country on sexual exploitation and abuse. This is the most effective medium for reaching the Sierra Leonean audience.

Dozens of local organizations work on FGM education in rural communities. The GoSL has not officially denounced the practice, and there is virtually no government/SLP support for local campaigns unless a death or serious FGM-related injury occurred in the area.

C) GBV cases are generally not priorities in the court system, which is generally very slow regardless of type of crime. Sixty-five Sierra Leone Police officers completed GBV Prosecutorial and Investigative Training in 2008 (both FSU officers and others). IRC noted that, while the participants appreciated the training and were able to use many techniques for GBV and non-GBV cases, the management structure was not in place to allow many of those trained to even work on GBV cases. The management changed after the course and many of the police prosecutors were assigned in different directions. Some upcountry magistrates have been very active in pursuing

GBV cases, while others have not. Many court officials/clerks do not take the issue seriously and anecdotal evidence suggests that cases are frequently thrown out of court due to lack of evidence, or that prestigious community members, such as Paramount Chiefs and Members of Parliament, pressure the judiciary to drop charges. Sometimes victims or their families are bribed by their attackers to abandon the case. Even cases that are formally pursued can result in no prosecutions or convictions: the slowness of the process can deter victims who either want to move on, or can no longer afford the travel costs to and from the court.

Besides challenges on the prosecutorial side, law enforcement can also be lax or non-existent for these crimes: many officers have no training on GBV, and either do not understand them or do not consider them to be crimes (even though they are against the law). This means that justice for victims varies radically from location to location. Even high-level officers have taken a relaxed approach to GBV: some FSU officers have reported that they are forced to drop strong cases on orders from their Local Unit Commander.

Coupled with the lack of training and knowledge for law enforcement and the judiciary, organizations point to poor understanding of existing gender-related acts as a problem. Many of these acts, including the Domestic Violence Act, are relatively new (passed in 2007), and information about laws and their appropriate implementation has yet to trickle completely down to the district level. Organizations, such as IRC, conduct sensitization programming in collaboration with the FSU. These programs target communities, schools, and the security sector.

D) The Military Police within the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) conduct domestic violence training for soldiers, having recently recognized that DV is a significant problem in the ranks. The training program is supported by the UK. Reported allegations of abuse are investigated, and sources noted that the incidence has appeared to drop since the training began. Sexual assault, however, has not been a focus for the RSLAF.

E) The MOSWGCA has such limited capacity that they do not have the power to advocate effectively to ensure that gender issues are placed into general humanitarian/capacity-building work done by other Ministries. Women's empowerment is often spoken of, but not necessarily included in many poverty reduction activities. The MOSWGCA trained and placed gender focal points at all Ministries, but these positions were

FREETOWN 00000304 003 OF 004

generally too low-level to have an appreciable impact. Also, the individuals were considered "administrators," and are frequently transferred between ministries. However, NGOs and UN organizations generally try to include women's empowerment issues or a gender focus in their programs.

F) N/A

G) The Human Rights Commission has worked with Paramount Chiefs to educate them about the Gender Acts. The purpose of the program was to discuss the power dynamics between customary law and legislated law, and more work needs to be done to reinforce this point at the local level.

The MOSWGCA has also worked with Paramount Chiefs and traditional women leaders on this issue. It was well received and the Ministry feels that more work should be done to train civil society members to disseminate information for the Ministry. IRC has conducted training with male action groups, and most organizations acknowledge that focused campaigns for men would be helpful: such activities, however, require skill and acumen that most organizations acknowledge they do not have.

H) Despite the existence of the NaC-GBV, donor coordination

is still lacking. The MOSWGCA has a very small budget, and relies on service providers to accurately report their activities. Though the Ministry believes that most do, some organizations discussed difficulties with overlapping GBV programs, and donors with predetermined, duplicative project plans. Though still in its developing stages, the NaC-GBV is making in-roads in building stronger partnerships and trust relationships between all GBV stakeholders, including the UN and others agencies.

¶3. In a country like Sierra Leone, whose infrastructure was decimated by the war and redevelopment hindered by poverty, ideas for service provision are unlikely to be "new" or "innovative." The most basic victim services are unavailable here, and though coordination is required to prevent duplication, significant gaps remain to be filled. The following programming ideas would benefit victims of GBV in Sierra Leone:

A) Strengthen support for survivors by expanding Rainbo Center services within existing hospital structures to rural communities. Co-locating the Centers in hospitals eliminates construction and administrative costs for a separate facility, and may also help to establish long-term sustainability: the Ministry of Health is mandated to provide services to victims, and while it currently can not, could potentially do so in the future. IRC is very interested in up-country expansion, but only if multi-year funding is provided at the outset of the project. IRC's greatest concern is that funding will end before GoSL entities can assume responsibility for them, leaving victims unassisted.

B) Increasing access to legal aid in underserved communities would also be extremely beneficial. The government does not provide any form of pro bono legal services, but NGOs have been working at the local level to fill this gap. Embassy Freetown's recent Democracy and Human Rights Funds request (reftel B) included a proposal from "Timap for Justice," which seeks to provide legal counsel to women and children in rural areas (Note: This proposal was not selected for funding. End Note). Since customary law is the norm outside of Freetown, which is generally patriarchal and prone to manipulation, providing women with the option of using the normal judicial structure will increase their access to justice. Pro bono services and law clinics will enable women and children to get the full benefit of the recent acts passed for their protection.

C) Interlocutors pointed to the need for secure shelters for victims of abuse, or those stigmatized as a result of their abuse. Ministry contacts advocated that such shelters be rented, so that locations can be easily changed should security threats arise. These contacts also spoke frankly about their lack of capacity, and therefore interest in seeing shelters operated by NGOs or IOs that are better able to maintain them. Shelters, like increased Rainbo Center coverage, will require long-term investment by donors: it is unlikely that the GoSL will be able to sustain them in the near- and immediate-future.

D) Though a number of organizations are already engaged in training efforts, the need here is so great for further education on GBV that funding would be well-used in this capacity. Trainings could target a variety of audiences, including the SLP, legal officers, social workers, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and the military.

FREETOWN 00000304 004 OF 004

¶4. Comment: Post appreciates the opportunity to highlight this important issue for the Department, and looks forward to future policy and programming endeavors. GBV is a scourge in Sierra Leone, and will take a multi-faceted approach to address. A "Women in Crisis" component can be added to post's existing programs on gender and the law. We hope Democracy and Human Rights funding will be granted in future to address

the post-conflict issues of Sierra Leonean women. Interlocutors shared their realistic thoughts about how to move forward, recognizing cultural and infrastructural factors that create obstacles towards ameliorating this endemic problem. There is opportunity and optimism that a collective effort will ultimately prevail, and result in greater gender equality across security, economic, legal, and social lines. Such a change would help move Sierra Leone from the "post-conflict" phase, and into one of development. End Comment.

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